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Only a Bay of Pigs

WASHINGTON

We can hope that the ransom scandal will turn out to be more of a Bay of Pigs than a Watergate. Here is Presidential guidance from a hand with a memory:

1. *Reassess all recent advice from the N.S.C. staff.* From the moment of the revelation of arms shipments to the discovery of diversion of profits to the contras (or whoever wound up with the money), you were misled.

That advice was to say only that you had "no plans" for further shipments to Iran; to refuse to rescind your secret order of Jan. 17 authorizing such shipments; and to blame the press for the continuing captivity of the remaining hostages.

You now know that the advice came from people with guilty knowledge of the skimming of the profits for apparently unlawful purposes. They were using you to cover up their secret. Therefore, reverse field: make the refusal to deal with kidnapers and their state sponsors your real policy, rescind the secret order, and stop grousing about the media pressure that led to your own discovery of the chicanery.

2. *Shut up for a week.* Everything you say in half-knowledge will be used against you: the point you made in your press conference about "missiles that we sold — and remember, there are too many people that are saying 'gave'. They bought them." Since the sale's profit led to such trouble, that now rings hollow (though your emphasis does suggest that you did not know the ultimate beneficiary of the sale).

3. *Trust nobody completely.* Ed Meese performed admirably at this week's revelations, but he may have mistaken legal opinions to defend; John Tower has credibility in Congress, but his chief aide and protegee was Robert McFarlane, whose grab for glory is at the root of this mess.

4. *Reach a compromise on the "mistake" admission.* Hyperventilating TV reporters, along with Republicans who were not appointed or were fired and are in a state of *Schadenfreude*, buttressed by hordes of defeated Democrats and doves eager to watch you squirm — all demand some evidence of contrition.

There is a way to draw some of the poison out of the atmosphere without crawling. "My initial goal to find an opening to the successor generation in Iran was a worthy goal. And history will show that my decision to ship some arms as evidence of our seriousness could have been the right decision. But insofar as the method chosen to keep secret this initiative corrupted the diplomatic process, then, yes, that was a mistake. I take

Seven steps for survival

full responsibility, and regret especially what the political reaction may do for support to the forces fighting for freedom in Nicaragua."

5. *Assess the vulnerability of your top associates and retain only those who can survive investigation.* The first file to call for is the draft of the National Security Decision Directive prepared by Admiral Poindexter authorizing the sale of arms to a terrorist state. What did your Cabinet say? Defense denounced it as "absurd"; State prepared a long response in rebuttal that is sure to surface at a Congressional hearing; what did your Chief of Staff advise, and what was the C.I.A. position?

You can try to draw a distinction between the rightness of your arms-for-an-opening plan and the wrongdoing in carrying it out, but so long as the men who approved what is now taken to be an enormous blunder remain in office, the ransom story will weigh down your Presidency. If Don Regan and Bill Casey are vulnerable, they should step out now; hanging tough means hanging you.

6. *Do not let bad guys besmear good guys.* Robert McFarlane, bidding to become Mr. Reagan's John Dean, claims the Secretary of State was "fully informed". But Secretary of State Shultz was told that the operation was "stood down", in the N.S.C.'s military patois; he was not told of the central events, your Jan. 17 secret "finding" or of the McFarlane trip or trips to Iran.

You need strong aides, not yes-men. Secretary of State Jefferson's warmth toward Citizen Genet, despite President Washington's coolness, is precedent for occasional public differences between White House and State. If the first President could abide independence in a good man, so can the fortieth; by making it known today that he will stay until January, 1989, you and he have provided the best news in the worst week.

7. *Assure the people, in your next speech, that history will not repeat.* You are engaging in no cover-up; there is no smoking gun and no taping system. This was only Mr. Reagan's Bay of Pigs, connoting comeback and redemption. Even those who believed in Mr. Nixon to the end, and were let down, can believe in that. □